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Pro(re)gressive and re(pro)gressive tendencies in language fossilization

Fossilization, being, among other things, defined as a propensity for language behaviours lacking appropriate forms and features, takes on different forms and tendencies alone. The very tendencies are generated by many factors, age and proficiency level being the most prominent and influential ones. In view of the influence the above-mentioned exert on fossilization as such, the article attempts to outline the patterns of fossilization (non)-development with respect to the adult language learners and users at the advanced level.

1. Language fossilization

Explanations of the concept of fossilization reflect its diversity and complexity. To name a few, the phenomenon in question is perceived as:

- ‘ultimate attainment’ (Selinker 1974: 36),
- ‘(...) non-progression of learning (...)’ (Selinker 1992: 257),
- ‘(...) cessation of further systematic development in the interlanguage’ (Selinker&Han 1996),
- ‘(...) regular reappearance or re-emergence in IL productive performance of linguistic structures which were thought to have disappeared’ (Selinker 1974: 36), or

- ‘the long term persistence of plateaus of non-target- like structures in the interlanguage of non-native speakers’ (Selinker & Lakshmanan 1993: 197).

More specifically, ultimate attainment stands for the end state the advanced learners reach well on their way to learning a language, denoting, at the same time, the lack of potential for further development. This inability to improve and/or develop in the language recurs under the label of a widely-understood non-progression or cessation of learning. Crucial as these notions are to the phenomenon of fossilization, they are not the only ones. As can be seen in the last two explanations, much of the onus also falls on a permanent retention and reappearance of (correct and/or incorrect) language habits and forms within the fossilised language competence.

Judging by the afore-mentioned descriptions, it goes without saying that fossilization is subject to changes, modifications and verifications. And, more precisely, it can be referred to as temporary, tendentious and regressive in character, resulting in language blockage and impediment, as well as incorrectness.

1.1. Source of fossilization

The sources of fossilization are numerous, and reach cognitive, psychological, neuro-biological, socio-affective and environmental dimensions. Cognitively speaking, it is the *lack of access to Universal Grammar (UG)*, *failure of parameter resetting* and *non-operation of UG learning principles* that are most frequently reported to bear an influence on the actual state of the knowledge of the TL. This is particularly true of adult learners, whose lack of access to full range of UG directly contributes to their incomplete L2 ultimate attainment. Stripped of those aspects of UG not incorporated into the L1, and deprived of *UG learning principles*, the learners have a limited knowledge of the TL, their process of learning being effortful and time-consuming.

From a psychological point of view, it is the learners’ *reluctance to take the risk of restructuring*, their *natural tendency to focus on content, not on form*, and *transfer of training* that contribute to fossilization. In the first case, the learners give up and do not say a word instead of making an attempt to form reformulations and language alterations. In the second, As Skehan (1998) claims, the meaning priority, especially evident in the case of the adult learners, relegates the form of language into the category of

secondary importance. This momentarily results in learners' tendencies to 'say less but mean more', without exhaustive analyses and use of the structure of an already deviant language. As long as communicative effectiveness is achieved, the erroneous structures are doomed to survive and stabilize, usually becoming nothing but syntactic fossils. And, finally, *transfer of training*, be it the actual examples of teacher's bad language, or the result of textbook content and method, it is considered to be the source of misused and overused forms, constituting an "overture" to fossilized competence.

Taking into consideration neuro-biological constraints triggering fossilization, much of the onus falls on *age* and *maturational constraints*. What is at issue is Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which, in its second version under the name of the Maturational State Hypothesis, holds that

(...) early in life, humans have a superior language capacity. The capacity disappears or declines with maturation, i.e. even when it is used normally for L1 acquisition.

(Long 2003: 497)

Having reached this stage in life, the learning process becomes explicit, and does not take place without a great deal of effort invested on the part of the learners. In addition, lack of brain plasticity, which reduces its capacity for new forms of learning, comes down to a non-fluent and non-native language construct.

As far as the socio-affective account of fossilization is concerned, *satisfaction of communicative needs* is given priority here. As it emerges from Selinker's (1974) evidence, the learner's self-confidence and perceptions of his/her language proficiency as fairly enough to communicate in L2 stop him/her from learning. Even though the learners might be aware of language inconsistencies and deviant forms fixed in their linguistic repertoire, they usually do not make any effort to restructure them since the language they produce meets their expectations. Communicatively efficient as the language may seem to its actual users, it is, in fact, on the right way to regress, on account of being used fragmentarily, and/or being abused.

The relationship between the environment and language fossilization rests on the *amount* and *quality of input* the learners are exposed to in the classroom. Typically, the classroom input is very much limited and lacks in language variety. Most often, it comes from the teacher talk, student talk, and language materials to hand. Teacher talk, like foreigner talk, consists in

adjustments at all language levels, and, by definition, is unnatural and artificial. In similar vein, student talk is given undesirable attributes on account of its unnatural way to develop. Lastly, the language materials widely-used in the classroom are non-authentic ones, and, thus, the input they provide is confined, more often than not, within the contents of the course-book, evoking fossilization.

1.2. Scope of fossilization

Although Selinker & Lakshmanan (1993) clearly state that there is no precise list of fossilizable language structures, it is common knowledge that it touches upon both spoken and written modes of the language, affecting language accuracy and fluency in the former case, and language accuracy and text-coherence in the latter. Despite prominence being given to pronunciation, namely the so called “foreign accents”, fossilization is expected to occur at phonological, morphological, lexical as well as syntactic levels. While foreign accents and examples of bad pronunciation in general are to a greater or lesser extent observable among FL learners irrespective of their L1 background and language, fossilizable language structures at the level of morphology, lexis and syntax are more L1 specific, and their frequency of occurrence is likely to differ with respect to the native language of a given FL learner.

The language problems the Polish learners of English encounter with respect to the oral discourse are related to phonology, lexis and syntax. Those identified by Wysocka (1989) or, more recently, by Gabryś-Barker (2003) included over and underuse of articles, misuse of prepositions, misuse of regular and irregular comparison of adjectives, problems with word order (e.g. lack of inversion), problems with word formation (e.g. wrong prefixes and suffixes), underuse of passivity, problems with word stress, wrong sentence stress, wrong intonation, overuse of fillers, incoherence, limited range of conversation management devices, and use of hesitation sounds typical of the Polish language.

In his analysis of the written interlanguage, on the other hand, Arabski (1979) claims that the learners at the advanced level show a propensity to produce errors mostly at lexical and grammatical levels. His findings concord neatly with the data obtained by Gabryś-Barker (2003) or Piasecka (2004) explaining that semantic problems at the level of the lexical subsystem re-

flect students' failure to precisely conceptualise their thoughts. Wrong word usage results from their inability to differentiate between language style and register whereas wrong morphological word forms are caused by students' ignorance of any word coinage rules. Grammatical dimension, on the other hand, is strongly represented by preposition, article and pronoun problems. Usually, syntactic difficulties arise when the students are confronted with tense and mood forms. Moreover, they produce wrongly-ordered sentences, and build ill-formed language items.

Predictions to the language (non)-susceptibility as there may exist, it needs to be emphasised that, as Selinker & Lamendella (1981: 219), have it, '(...) the language structure may be differently fossilized at varying degrees of approximation to TL norms', still leaving aside the features which are successfully acquired or continue to evolve. What is more, some of the fossilised language forms increase with time, some other decrease, and yet other remain constant.

2. The research

The exact tendencies were noticed during a one-year longitudinal study on fossilization. It consisted in the three four-month-apart measurements of the subjects' actual performance in English, and rested on oral and written text samples on each occasion.

2.1. The sample

The study in focus was conducted among the population of 5th year students attending extramural classes at the English Department at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. The sample was composed of 51 female and 7 male students, aged 23–45. The group was pretty homogeneous in terms of the qualifications obtained, i.e. 53 BA degrees in English Studies, with an exception of 4 respondents holding an MA degree in Early School Education, and 1 person having a master's degree in Environmental Protection. The subjects differed to a large extent with respect to their learning and teaching history; the former covering the period of 10–15 years on average, the latter ranging from 2 to 15.

2.2. The method

The subjects' contribution to the research took on the form of oral and written assignments. The former focused on students' oral performance and were designed to record samples of the language output produced by the informants in the course of speaking. More specifically, the respondents were required to comment on one of the statements drawn from the list of quotations given. Each time, the responses recorded were intended to mirror the students' 3 minute spontaneous reactions to the topic.

As opposed to oral assignments, written tasks were centred upon examining a written discourse produced by the group under investigation. This time, each of the questioned students was asked to pick a slip of paper containing a topic for discussion. Having selected one of the quotations at a time, they were requested to remark on the issues in focus in writing, given a 30-minute time-limit on every occasion.

2.2.1. Fossilization indicators

The measurement criteria used in the analysis of fossilization tendencies involved language accuracy, fluency, and text-coherence.

Table 1. Fossilization indicators

ORAL	WRITTEN
• the criterion of accuracy:	• the criterion of accuracy:
– grammar	– grammar
– lexis	– lexis
– morphology	– morphology
– phonology	– spelling
	– punctuation
• the criterion of fluency:	• the criterion of text coherence:
– final and unfilled pauses	
– fillers	– fillers
– repetitions	– repetitions
– false starts (reformulations)	– false starts (reformulations)
– unfinished words/phrases	– unfinished words/phrases
– over-reliance on certain structures	– over-reliance on certain structures
– overuse of discourse markers	– overuse of discourse markers
– redundant categories	– redundant categories
– meaningless expressions	– meaningless expressions

In the case of the spoken discourses, the subjects' responses were looked at from the perspective of language accuracy and fluency. The former covered grammar, lexis, morphology and phonology, whereas the latter relied on pauses, all-purpose words, repetitions, reformulations, unfinished utterances, over-reliance on certain structures, overuse of discourse markers, redundant categories or meaningless expressions.

As far as the criteria employed in the examination of the written text samples are concerned, these comprised language accuracy and text cohesion. In addition to the previously described grammar, lexis and morphology, language accuracy covered spelling and punctuation. The text samples examined for text coherence, on the other hand, underwent the analysis of inter-sentential and intra-sentential links, including such aspects as fillers, repetitions, reformulations, over-reliance on certain structures, redundant categories, overuse of discourse markers, meaningless/unfinished utterances.

3. Tendencies in fossilization

The above-mentioned occurrences contributed to tendencies which can be best illustrated by means of a diagram where the horizontal x axis is linked with time determined by the three measurements of fossilization, whereas the vertical y axis stands for the scope of fossilization defined by the frequency of occurrence of a given category of fossilization syndromes.

Deriving from the figures, the so called oral fossilization operates on three different patterns indicative of its changes in time. The first one, i.e. the *rise-fall* pattern, is represented by grammar. The reverse situation, namely, the *fall-rise* tendency concerns phonology and fluency-related issues, whereas the third regularity, referred to as a *slow rise*, arises from lexis. The extreme cases, that is, a high and low degree of dynamism are reflected by disfluency markers and lexical inaccuracies respectively. The former is composed of correct and incorrect fixed expressions frequently over-used, the latter being identified with the usage of wrong words. As the patterns, generally speaking, can be related to learning, rise-fall designating progress-regress cases, and fall-rise corresponding to improvement-deterioration in learning, the case of disfluencies, though progressive in nature, is indicative of the subjects' language regression.

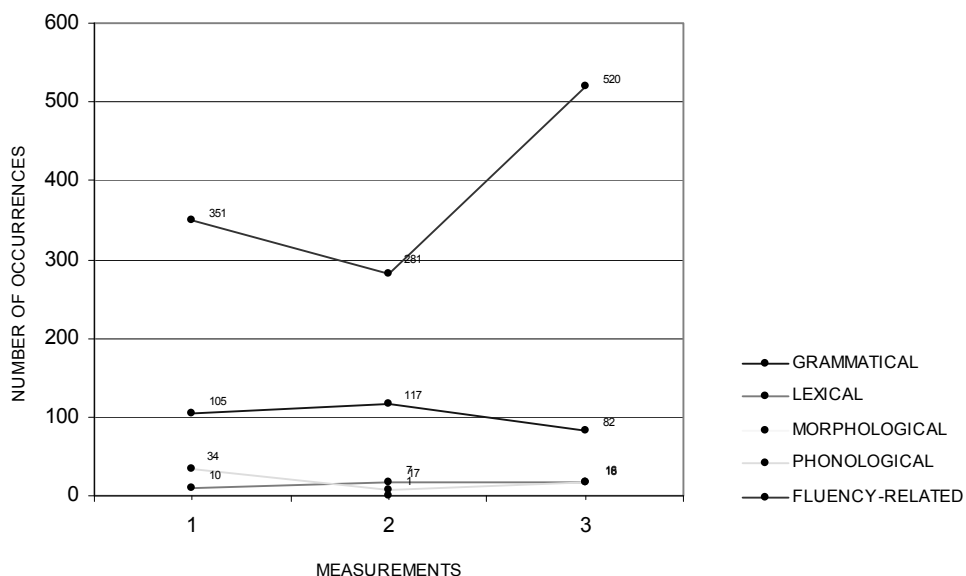


Fig. 1. Pro(re)gressive and re(pro)gressive tendencies of oral fossilization

Similarly, written fossilization is governed by three patterns, however, one of the combinations differs from the previous ones. Aside from the *rise-fall* and the *slow rise* tendency, a constellation of the *rise-fall-rise* patterns comes to light.

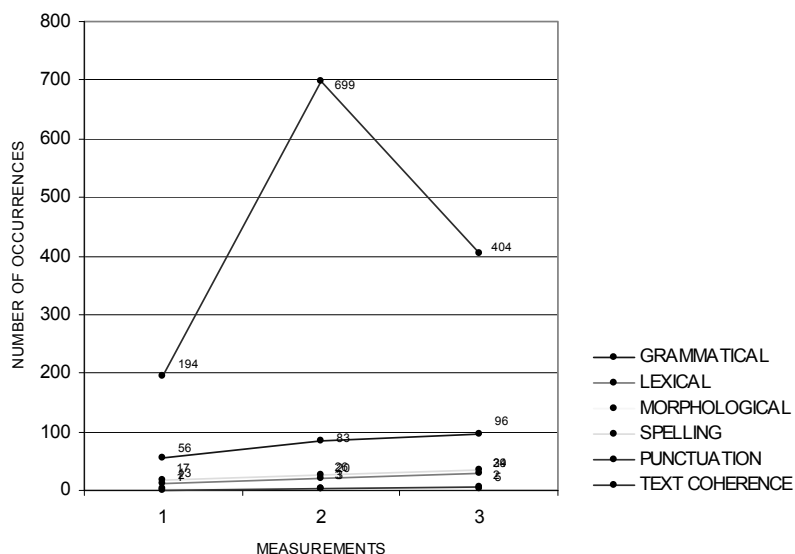


Fig. 2. Pro(re)gressive and re(pro)gressive tendencies of written fossilization

This time, it is the rise-fall tendency, made up of the so called text coherence-related issues, that contributes to a large extent to a dynamic nature of the process in question. Such a rapid change in the use of fixed expressions may be a reflection of subjects' improvement, evident in their greater reliance on free rather than fixed expressions, the latter of which proved to be responsible for the production of empty language. Regularities referred to as a slow rise, represented by grammatical, lexical, spelling and punctuation mistakes, testify to a worsening language coverage, and decreasing quality of output, which can be related to the learning problem such as regression. In final, the rise-fall-rise pattern, as in the case of morphology, shows that the level of fossilization fluctuates and so does the subjects' learning process looked at from the perspective of the level of their actual language competence.

4. Final word

In trying to account for the above-mentioned tendencies, the source of the changes in question seems to lie in the changes the subjects undergo with respect to their linguistic competence. It can be assumed that fossilization development is resultative of the subjects' non-learning, whereas regression in fossilization is considered to be a reflection of their learning in progress. Taking into account this regularity, the author of the thesis proposes to construe fossilization as a bi-polar process defined by means of the relations between the knowledge (non)-growth (pole 1) and language (non)-development (pole 2). The knowledge growth is expected to bring about a decrease in the number of fossilised language behaviours. The opposite situation, i.e. the lack of knowledge growth is believed to lead to language non-development, the result of which being language fossilization.

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